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ABSTRACT

As black children are portrayed too often in literature with negative images, it is understandable why they suffer from low self-esteem. In addition to being described as impoverished, black children are shown to be ugly (according to European standards), semiliterate or illiterate, poorly dressed, and malnourished. Northern settings also frequently include such negative features as drug addiction, prostitution, sexual aberration, and other crimes. Stories by Diane Oliver, Ernest Gaines, and Louise Meriwether are representative of contemporary black literature with negative images. This does not mean, however, that teachers, writers, and parents must dwell on the negative side of reality. Writers must continue to produce more books and stories that will help black children develop positive self-concepts, individuality, pride in their heritage, and a sense of their potential and self-worth. They do not need books that foster antagonism, self-hatred, or feelings of inferiority and ugliness. Children's attitudes toward blacks are determined not by physical contact with them but by contact with prevailing attitudes toward them. Therefore, the negative portrayal of children in contemporary black literature must be changed. (HTH)

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THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK LITERATURE: THE CHILD IN ITS ENVIRONMENT, NORTH VS. SOUTH

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THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK LITERATURE
THE CHILD IN ITS ENVIRONMENT: NORTH VS. SOUTH

"The most important asset a people has is its young," says Haki Madhubuti. "Without children, there is no continuation, there is no future. You cannot build a Black nation or world with one generation: we need generations. We need a youth that can complete that which we start, a youth that can challenge the future we're bound for."[1] Therefore, we should make an investment in that future which will mature a thousand times if that investment is sound. And one way to make a sound investment is to make sure that children grow with a positive self-concept in very positive surroundings. To promote positive self-concepts, the negative concepts must be eradicated. These negatives are what Mary Carter Smith calls "untruths" in her poem by the same name.

Kinky hair is bad
Africans are wild
Black is always evil
And makes you one ugly child
All of you can dance
All of you sing
Because you were born poor
You'll never amount to anything
Untruths
Untruths
Rob you of your pride
Learn truths
You'll feel better deep inside[2]

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[1]Haki Madhubuti, Black Books Bulletin, 2, Winter 1974, front cover.

[2]Mary Carter Smith, Town Child, (Columbia, Maryland: Nordika Publications, 1976), p. 52.

Too often Black children are portrayed in such negative images in our literature. Therefore, it is understandable why our children suffer from a low self-esteem. Whenever we do not see an impoverished child in literature or the media, it is because that child is being taken care of by a rich Mr. Drummond or a Father Murphy.

While this paper is not an in-depth study but a testing paper for future investigations, several hypoteses can be made from the few works that were read for this paper. One general conclusion is that the child is always portrayed as a child of poverty--regardless if the setting of the story is southern or northern. Some concomitant factors of the impoverished image are that the child is ugly--according to European standards, semi-literate (or illiterate), poorly dressed, and malnourished. If the setting is a northern setting, then one must include such negative factors as dope addiction, prostitution, or some sexual aberration, and crimes of all kinds. In a future study, other factors that I would like to consider are whether the northern child is less impertinent, whether there is a closer relationship between parent and child, and whether the southern child is more socially secure because of his closely-knitted, although poor, extended family. In a northern setting, the

extended family for the child is often the street. If the child, northern or southern, is lucky to have two parents, the father is often portrayed as less of a man, such as Walter Lee in Raisin in the Sun or Mr. Coffin in Daddy Was a Number Runner. Or, the father is a step-father such as Butler Craig in A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich.

In the stories of Diane Oliver, the father is away--at least temporarily. Hal, the father, in "Traffic Jam"[3] and "Health Service"[4] is supposed to be "up north" working, but Libby, the wife, thinks of his being away as desertion. (Nevertheless, we do see Hal return at the end of "TRAFFIC JAM", the second of the two stories.) Regardless, his being away subjects the family to a destitute kind of life, causing Libby to take a job as a domestic. In addition to the meager salary, the job allows her to sneak extra food which has been left over. When asked does Mrs. Nelson know that she takes food, Libby replies: "No, I guess she knows I take what's left. ...Mrs. Nelson never gives away anything unless it's spoiled" (p. 77).

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[3]Diane Oliver, "Traffic Jam", Negro Digest (July 1966), pp. 70-78. (Hereafter all references to this story will be cited in the text with page numbers in parentheses.)

[4]_____. "Health Service", Negro Digest (November 1965), pp. 72-79.

There are other instances in "Traffic Jam" when the reader is made acutely aware of the malnourished condition of the children. In one instance as Libby prepares the Nelsons' lunch, she thinks that at the same time she is preparing the Nelson's lunch that Meetrie was getting lunch for the younger children by scavenging around neighbors' fruit trees for apples. Since Libby never knew what fruit would be available for picking, she always left out cold potatoes. "Sometimes there was enough food to make a sandwich for them to share" (pp. 72-73). Another time we see Libby subconsciously comparing what the Nelsons have for breakfast and what her children have. (Meetrie could not believe her mother's account of the Nelsons' abundance of food.) "And sometimes when she [Libby] was pouring those cornflakes into the four cups and stretching the powdered milk with more water than the welfare lady ever intended, she didn't believe herself. This morning when she sat down to spoonfeed him [Wicker] his cornflakes, Meetrie made a regular nuisance of herself waiting for his left over cereal, asking every five seconds if he had finished eating" (p. 71).

In addition to the family not being adequately nourished, there is not adequate child care, especially since Libby's mother is too sick and too old to care for the children. (At times the older children stay by themselves.) While Libby washes dishes at the

Nelsons, she remembers: "If Mrs. Dickens didn't soon move Calvin from the laundry basket on the back porch, the sun would be shining right into his face. ...She had asked Mrs. Dickens if she could leave Calvin inside the house, but according to Mrs. Dickens, "6:30 a.m. was too early to be fooling with a baby. Besides, Mrs. Dickens had said, 'everybody around here's got too many babies to have to steal one off my front porch.'"

Similarly, in Miss Oliver's "Health Service", we see that there is not adequate health service. On her Saturday off, which comes very rarely, Libby has to walk long country miles to the doctor, taking all five children when only one child is sick. Then the disappointment really comes. The doctor closes his office before some of the patients are seen. This is what happens when one is poor, especially when dealing with health clinics. The clients are at the mercy of those who provide social services.

In addition to the poor health care, malnutrition, and lack of proper child care, a fourth consequence of poverty is the inadequately dressed child. Libby's children are examples. As Libby prepares for their long, hot trek to the Health Clinic, she carefully ". . . pulls the ragged flower bonnet over his face to keep out the sun. If he had a hat, at least nobody could tell that

he needed a haircut."

As I mentioned at the beginning of the illustrations, Libby's husband was "up north" working, but the reader learns in "Traffic Jam" that Hal's return is not going to help the impoverished situation because he returns with a car. Libby's nonverbal reactions are: "Here they were needing to get the house fixed up so the chimney didn't smoke when the cold came. She still hadn't paid the doctor his money from the last time that Calvin was in the hospital, and he decided to bring home a car" (p. 76-77). Then aloud to her husband, she asks at different times: "Now that you're here, you going to sell it? "What are you going to do for a job? Where're you planning to get money for gas? The Esso man won't give you no credit unless you been working steady around here" (p. 77). Libby is just as perturbed with Hal for bringing the children candy. She admonishes him: "They can't wear candy on their feet" (p. 76).

This car situation is reminiscent of Ernest Gaines' "A Long Day in November" from his collection of short stories entitled Bloodline.[5] The abject poverty of this family does not stop the

[5]Ernest Gaines, Bloodline, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963). (Hereafter all references to this story will be cited in the text.)

father from buying a car, also. He rationalizes that he needs the car to get to work. (A bit of humor lies within that rationalization because he works in the canefields which surround the house where he lives.) However, the time that he spends away from home with the worthless car causes strife between him and his wife.

In the story "Long Day in November" we have the portrayal of an unhappy child whose life is filled by the domestic strife. When the mother leaves the father and goes to the grandmother's house, the child has to endure the grandmother's shooting at his father, and he is subjected to the grandmother's belittling his father to his mother: "I warned you 'bout that nigger even before you married him. I sung at you and I sung at you. I said 'Amy, that nigger ain't no good. A yellow nigger with a gap like that 'tween his front teeth ain't no good" (p. 18). Because of all the confusion surrounding him, the child is hesitant about going to school, but reluctantly, he takes his one potato lunch and goes to school. After Sonny gets there, he remembers that his mother didn't teach him any lesson the night before or that morning. When the teacher calls on the first grade to read, Sonny is scared. And then she calls on him. "I don't know my lesson. I feel warm. I'm wet. I hear the wee-wee driping on the floor. I'm crying. I'm

crying because I wee-wee on myself" (p. 24). Certainly this psychogenetic[6] disorder stems from the frustrations within the child's environment. The parents are too distraught with the problems of day-to-day living to provide the social nourishment which the child needs. Joyce Ladner claims that "parents are unable to offer protection and carefree comfort to their children because of their own vulnerability to the discriminative practices of the larger society."[7] And we know very well what the consequences of discriminatory practices are--poverty and all of its ugly bedfellows.

Others of Gaines' child characters suffer the indignities of poverty. In the opening of the story "The Sky is Gray," James suffers miserably from a toothache for more than a month, but he refuses to tell his mother because he knows the family doesn't have enough money for the dentist. When his mother does find out, she counts out her meager holdings as she anticipates the trip to town: "Enough to get there and get back. Twenty-five for me to go; twenty-five cents for him. Twenty-five for me to come back. Twenty-five for him. Fifty cents left. Guess I'll get a little piece of

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[6]psychogenetic: the origination and development within the psyche, or mind; specifically the development of physical disorder as a result of mental conflicts rather than from organic causes.

[7]Joyce A. Ladner. Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), p. 57-58.

salt meat with that" (p. 57).

(I might add here that there is a situation in this story which is similar to Oliver's "Health Service.") Just as the doctor closes the office before all of the patients are seen, the dentist in Gaines' story closes for lunch before all of the patients are seen. This means that James and his mother have two hours to wander the streets in the cold weather for which they are ill-prepared. When the sleet comes down so heavily, the mother decides to go "back of town" where the colored people eat. When she realizes that the cold weather is too unbearable for them to continue walking, the mother uses one of the oldest survival tactics--her wit. She and her son enter a hardware store, and she sends her son to stand by the potbellied stove while she goes to examine ax handles. She carefully and slowly examines each handle which the clerk shows her, rejecting each until a glance at her son instinctively lets her know that he is sufficiently warm. Then, in going back to the dentist at the prescribed hour, their situation subjects them to taking hand-outs, much like the hand-outs Libby has to take in "Traffic Jam" and "Health Service."

Another example of the inadequate food problem is when the child complains about his breakfast. "Shucks, syrup again. I'm

getting tired of this old syrup. Syrup, syrup, syrup. I'm go'n take with the sugar diabetes. I want me some bacon sometimes." The aunt retorts: "You better be glad you got syrup. Some people ain't got that--hard's time is" (p. 88). The family's food situation is so destitute that the family eats owls, blackbirds, and redbirds. James remembers: . . . they [birds] was so little. I 'member how I picked the feathers off them and cleaned them, and held them over the fire. Then we all ate them. Ain't had but a little bitty piece each, but we all had a piece. . . .(p.90).

Such examples, which illustrate how our children are portrayed in contemporary Black literature, can be repeated again and again. Yet this is not to say that there are not positive images of the Black child. Sonia Sanchez's book of stories for children depict children who are not fraught with such hardships. Also, Lucille Clifton's The Times They Used to Be comes to mind, and I am certain that there are other stories/novels where the setting is "upnorth" and where the living is easy--so the southerners thought. Most of these southerners brought and kept their poverty with them and picked up a few other problems when they got north. Francie Coffin in Daddy Was a Number Runner[8] thought about "us

[8]Louise Meriwether, Daddy Was a Number Runner (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1970). (Hereafter all references to this story will be cited in the text with page numbers in parenthesis.)

colored up here in the north, something I couldn't quite figure out.

But it was better up here than down south. That's what I'd always heard people say, that folks down in Bip were just dying for a chance to come north to the promised land. This was the promised land, wasn't it?" (p. 123).

Louise Meriwether's Daddy Was a Number Runner is set in Harlem. This northern setting provides the other stereotypic vices, such as dope, prostitution, sexual perversion, and other crimes. James Baldwin declares that "the streets, tenements, fire-escapes, the elders, and the urgent concerns of childhood--or, rather, the helpless intensity of anguish with which one watches one's childhood disappear--are rendered very vividly by Louise Meriwether."[9]

Francie Coffin, the twelve year old heroine, picked up the numbers for her father; she knew who the prostitutes were; she knew about the prostitute who killed her pimp and she knew why; Francie knew of teacher harassment in school; she knew of street gangs and her brother's involvement with a gang; Francie knew when her girlfriend Sukie was raped. Although Francie and Sukie were always fighting, it was nevertheless a traumatic experience to

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[9]Meriwether, p. 7.

know that her childhood nemesis had been raped. Although she and Sukie sexually teased the perverts in the neighborhood, they never expected to get raped. In the movies, "he had tried to feel my legs and I changed my seat. He found me and sat next to me again, giving me a dime. His hands fumbled under my skirt and when he got to the elastic of my bloomers, I moved again" (p. 16). A second time when Francie sees the short, bald white man on the roof, he beckoned her to the roof with the offer of a dime: "Come and get it. I won't hurt you. I just want you to touch this. He fumbled with the front of his pants and took out his pee-pee. It certainly was ugly, purple, and wet-looking" (p. 17). There are other such encounters in the park and the movies; the butcher and the baker also "cop feels," and Francie gets extra meat or pastries in her grocery bag.

Because of the prevailing negative images, Francie sometimes wished for the positive things of life. She envies Sukie's pretty long reddish brown hair. (This is reminiscent of Toni Morrison's Pecola who wants blue eyes.) Francie's image of herself and her blackness leads her to envy Sukie's reddish-brown hair. The oppressive and discriminating society promotes these negative

concepts. Waring Cuney knew this fact when he wrote "No Images" in the 1930's:

> She does not know
> Her beauty.
> She thinks her brown body,
> Has no glory.
>
> If she could dance
> Naked
> Under palm trees,
> And see her image in the river
> She would know.
>
> But there are no palm trees
> On the street
> And dish water gives back no images.[10]

The negative self-image which Francie possesses is further provoked when she relates that none of her friends would go to Father's Divine place to get a fifteen cent meal because her friends "were too ashamed of those nappy-headed angels who wouldn't straighten their hair. ..." (p. 88.)

These and other such negative concepts shroud the life of Francie Coffin and her friends. Whatever one imagines breeding in those mean, northern streets erupted in Francie's world. But, in

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[10]Waring Cuney, "No Images," in Arthur Davis and Saunders Redding eds., Calvacade (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), p. 377.

assessing her world, Francie comes to the conclusion that "we was all poor and Black and apt to stay that way, and that was that" (p. 188). Consequently, Francie resignedly says at the end of the book "shit."

Granted that what has been listed in this paper as negatives is reality in the most awesome and frightening way, the rape in Meriwether and Toni Morrison's fiction is just as real as Maya Angelou's in I know Why the Caged Bird Sings or the sociological accounts in Joyce Ladner's Tomorrow's Tomorrow. However, it does not mean that the teachers, writers, scholars, parents, or whoever must dwell on the negative side of reality. Let us give positive concepts. How our children perceive themselves is a critical issue. Most scholars hold that the development of a positive self-concept is necessary for a child's adequate functioning in the society. Studies have consistently maintained that the formation of the self in the Black child presents a major problem because of the great influence of oppression. Joyce Ladner cites other studies which proved that serious personality disorders arise out of a lack of self-esteem in Black people. One such assertion she makes is that ". . .his (the Negro's) self-esteem suffers . . . because he is constantly receiving an unpleasant image of himself from the behavior of

others toward him. This is the subjective impact of social discrimination, and it sounds as though its effects ought to be localized and limited in influence. This is not the case. It seems to be an ever present and unrelieved irritant."[11] Therefore, those of us who are concerned about this problem must take the responsibility to improve the negative image of the Black child in contemporary Black literature. We must produce books and stories that will help the Black child have a positive concept about his identity, his individuality, his proud heritage, and his potential and worth as a human being. The Black child does not need books which foster antagonism, self-hatred, feelings of inferiority, ugliness, and sordidness. Although the Black child may need to be educated to the real life situations, all real life situations are not sordid. I would like to use Nikki Giovanni's statement that the reality of some poverty situations are not all gloomy. Her lines from "Nikki Rosa" are" . . . they'll/probably talk about my hard childhood/and never understand that/all the while I was quite happy."[12] There should be positive images of the child in contemporary

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[11]Joyce Ladner, Tomorrow's Tomorrow, p. 78.

[12]Nikki Giovanni, Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 58-59.

Black literature--nicely dressed, fed grits, collard greens, having medical check-ups, and happy even if the Daddy isn't at home.

This is to conclude that even if the family is all poor and struggling, they do not have to be always disillusioned and broken in spirit. All Black characters need not be disillusioned like Francie Coffin in Daddy Was a Number Runner who feels that "We was ll poor and black, and apt to stay that way, and that was that," so she resigns herself to this fact and sighs 'shit'" (p. 188).

Kenneth Clark, a noted psychologist and educator, points out that children's attitudes toward Blacks are determined not by physical contact with them but by contact with prevailing attitudes toward them.[13] Therefore, this image of the child in contemporary Black literature MUST be changed.

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[13]Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, Cultural Conformity in Books for Children: Further Readings in Racism (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 112.